

Basque Shepherdster Aspen Art in Nevada



Traces of Nevada's Basque shepherders may still be found in the form of arborglyphs among the aspens in the State's forests. Names, dates, and images carved into their white bark testify to the presence and lifestyle of shepherders over the last century on Peavine Mountain in Reno, and in groves all across Northern and Central Nevada. Many Harri mutilak, or stone cairns and some bread ovens built by shepherders still remain in areas now devoid of sheep.

A small percentage of Basque carvings are quite artistic in nature. More often, they consist of initials or names of the carver and dates he visited the aspen grove while tending sheep. Those arborglyphs most interesting to archaeologists, historians, and Basque researchers are those with texts that tell stories of loneliness, health, and hardships related to the herders' lengthy isolation during the long grazing season.

By the 1960s and 1970s, most Basque shepherders had been replaced by herders from other countries, particularly from South America, especially Peru. Today few sheep are grazed in the state and carvings are most frequently found around highly developed campgrounds and trails and are considered graffiti rather than art. The hundred year, or shorter, lifespan of aspen trees means Basque arborglyphs will soon be a thing of the past as they decay and are disappearing at an alarming rate.

For more information on Basque Folklore please visit:
<http://www.onlinenevada.org/articles/basque-folklife>

